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Living Well: Parents who raise the athletic bar too early are fueling burnout

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This sort of thing happens to Lenny Wiersma, well, virtually all the time: He meets people for dinner and ends up talking about kids and sports. That's because Wiersma makes his living as a researcher of youth sports.

"It's a natural thing, once everyone finds out what I do," said Wiersma, an assistant professor and co-director of the Center for the Advancement of Responsible Youth Sports at the University of California-Fullerton.

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On a recent night, Wiersma met a friend's pal who happened to be the father of a 17-year-old junior tennis champion. The man bragged about his daughter's achievements and training in Florida with famed instructor Nick Bollettieri, who coached Andre Agassi, Monica Seles and Jim Courier as youths on the way to tennis stardom.

Only one problem, the dad said. His daughter recently had hurt her ankle and seemed afraid to get back out on the court.

"I hate to say it," Wiersma told the father, "but sometimes a kid's injury lingers because the athlete feels handcuffed, like there is no way out. They use an injury to escape."

Impossible, said the father. He informed Wiersma the daughter was in the restaurant. He would go get her. Wiersma felt some awkwardness about the situation, especially putting a 17-year-old on the spot.

The girl and father came back to the table. The dad explained Wiersma's theory about why the ankle injury was taking so long to heal.

"He's right," said the daughter, meaning Wiersma had analyzed the situation perfectly.

"I thought you *love* tennis," said the father, confused and, likely, embarrassed.

"No, *you* love tennis," said the daughter, who at 17 was a grizzled veteran of too much tennis too early in life.

One of the biggest differences between youth sports participation today and the Little League days of any adult over, say, 35, is the disturbing trend toward specialization. Younger and younger, kids are placed in one sport, practicing and playing year-round.

Kids are facing special forces from the adults in their lives about what to do with the after-school time or summers or both. Clearly, parents are making narrowly focused sports decisions for their children, maybe with encouragement from a coach or a prominent sports star as role model.

You can blame some of this trend on Tiger Woods and the well-oiled tale of a father who drilled him on golf fundamentals from infancy. Same goes for childhood prodigy Agassi, still going remarkably strong as a late-thirtysomething, balding dad on the pro tennis tour.

But Woods and Agassi are exceptions in sports that are themselves exceptions. Golf favors those players who are always swinging the club, which makes a case for a child learning the game early. But subjecting that same natural golfer to early-life tournament pressure often backfires, if high school coaches and junior golf officials are reliable witnesses.

Tennis, like gymnastics and figure skating, is a sport that breeds young stars. There is significant criticism of the U.S. Tennis Association's practice of funding the most promising preteen and teen players, along with dozens of top players getting free equipment from companies hoping the next Agassi or Seles will play with their racket or shoes.

You could argue that some aggressive tennis parents, coaches and officials are taking a sport that can be played for a lifetime and burning out thousands of highly skilled players each year, kids who will vow never to volley again.

Pacific Northwest native Patti Gable has lived high-level gymnastics as both a competitor and a coach. As owner of Northwest Aerials in Kirkland, she has made the conscious decision not to run an elite program anymore. She has simply watched too many kids, predominantly girls, quit before realizing their full potential.

"Our gymnasts work out (only) five to seven hours per week," said Gable, who qualified for the 1976 U.S. Olympic Trials -- not making the final cut, yet only three years later becoming the coach of a highly promising 12-year-old Seattle girl with Olympic potential. "Other clubs have the gymnasts working out about 20 hours a week" -- sometimes more.

Gable said it is common to be wowed by a young gymnast who wins a state championship at, say, 10 or 11, then not see the girl return to competition the following season because the champion has burned out.

Gable loved gymnastics as a girl, not minding a long bus ride with her sister each weekday after school. But the Gable girls didn't start until 10, an age at which many of today's gymnasts already have had three to four years of intense training experience.

Gable's two daughters, 6 and 8, love to use the Aerials trampoline and tumbling mats.

"They will keep playing soccer and sing in a choir," said Gable, who, through her own actions, is making an effective statement about raising well-rounded children.

It's not that choosing to play a single sport is inherently bad. The problem threads more in the inevitable ratcheting up of competitiveness as the child gets older.

While some 10-year-olds can handle playing on a select basketball team, others begin to feel overmatched or, more common, inadequate because they are riding the bench while good friends get most of the playing time. In a cruel twist, sometimes childhood pals grow apart because one can hit a curveball, shoot jumpers or dig a hard volleyball serve while the other cannot.

Research shows that children's enjoyment level in sports highly correlates with playing at a level that reinforces their perceptions of ability.

"Athletes talk about 'being in the zone,' " explained Wiersma. "Being in the zone is about your ability level matching the challenge level. You feel more confidence and excitement."

Wiersma adds this telling point: "That's one reason kids love video games so much. They can each pick their own level of challenge."

Researchers and exercise scientists continue to debate the optimal age for kids to get serious about sports excellence. Some theorize that since some 70 percent of children stop playing organized sports by age 13 that means a typical athletic "career" lasts six to eight years. In that case, better to start a child at roughly 10 to 12, so the young athlete can play through high school years.

Other researchers contend that a surprising number of professional stars in team sports such as football, baseball and basketball came to the organized part of their sports as late as teenage years. The English Football Association (soccer to us Americans) has conducted studies indicating very few of the elite players in the country's schoolboy program actually go on to become players in the top-level Premiership league.

Some of the world's best athletes -- Michael Jordan is Exhibit A+ -- were late maturers in height and weight gains. As it was, Jordan was cut from his high school team as a sophomore.

If he had been subject to such tryouts and failures as a junior high player, it's possible he would have turned to his second favorite, baseball, a lot sooner than his brief fling with the Chicago White Sox in between his first and second retirements from pro basketball.

Certain team sports in the Puget Sound area are prime territory for single-tracking a child to such early exits and/or burnout. Some soccer programs routinely cut dozens of players after one or two days of tryouts. Basketball, baseball and softball are others. Football may be less subject to the phenomenon because a good number of parents -- I go on record as saying "rightly" -- delay any organized participation until a child is in high school.

Girls volleyball is a sport in which local kids don't get intensely involved in club sport play until 12 and, even then, don't make the bigger sacrifices until age 14. That could change in the continuing urge -- from parents mostly -- to specialize and aim for college scholarships and the Olympics, plus keep up with states such as California and Illinois.

"The elite athletes here are not club driven," said Tony Miranda, who runs the Northwest Juniors Volleyball Club based in Bellevue and acts as junior program director for the Puget Sound region of USA Volleyball.

"The really driven kids go see a 'sports enhancement' training specialist on their own. But 10 years from now, clubs could be routinely training and conditioning kids more aggressively."

Miranda said he wouldn't like to see specialization interfere with the quality level of competition and -- key word -- fun currently on display during the fall high school volleyball season.

"My fear is the great volleyball players won't even be on their high school teams because they will keep training year-round with their clubs," said Miranda, who also is head coach at Bellevue Community College. "That would definitely take some of the fun and excitement out of it."

He's concerned that volleyball may go the way of soccer and basketball, sports in which teams at some schools, especially smaller ones that take part in lesser levels of competition, are missing star athletes who have opted to follow a more intense club path.